NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

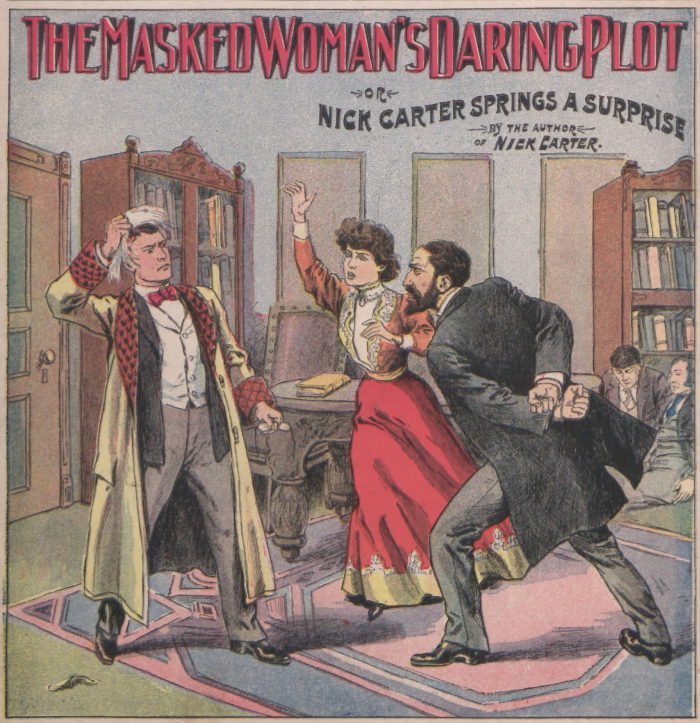
Issued Weekly. By subscription $2.50 per year. Entered at Second-class Matter at the N. Y. Post Office, by STREET & SMITH, 79-89 Seventh Ave., N. Y.

No. 540 NEW YORK, MAY 4, 1907. Price, Five Cents

THE MASKED WOMAN'S DARING PLOT

OR NICK CARTER SPRINGS A SURPRISE

BY THE AUTHOR OF NICK CARTER.



Nick then tore the wig and mustache from his face and threw them to the floor, at once revealing the trick and fraud he had played upon them.

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The Masked Woman's Daring Plot;

OR,

NICK CARTER SPRINGS A SUPRISE.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE MASKED WOMAN IN BLACK.

Nick Carter looked at the card which Joseph, his valet, gave to him, and read the name aloud to Chick, who was seated in the study with him.

"'Isabel Acton,'" he read.

Chick smiled. "I wonder what has happened now?" he said, changing his right leg to his left knee. "How long ago is it, Nick, since Isabel Acton helped us to unveil 'The Woman of the Mask'?"

"Somewhere about a month, isn't it? Or two months?"

"It is rather more than three months, Nick."

"How time flies, to be sure! But the name of Isabel Acton certainly does bring back to mind all the perplexing mysteries of that case, doesn't it? How utterly simple the entire thing was when the explanation was finally found, but how puzzling it did seem in the beginning." He turned to Joseph, who was waiting. "Where is she?" he asked.

"I showed the lady into the library, sir. She told me to say that if you happened to be busy, she could wait; but that she wished particularly to see you before she went away."

"All right, Joseph. Say that I will be down in a moment."

Isabel Acton rose to greet him when he entered the library fifteen minutes later. He noticed that her appearance had not changed; that she was quite as beautiful as ever, with her wealth of blond hair and her questioning blue eyes. But Nick had learned to know that behind the expression of her almost childish face there was an immense fund of character and self-reliance; and he believed that she had not sought him out at this time without good reason.

"I hope, Miss Acton, that the Woman of the Mask has not appeared again?" he said, with a smile; and she replied quickly:

"That is precisely what is the matter, Mr. Carter. The Woman of the Mask *has* reappeared. The Woman of the Mask—I believe we finally determined that it was after all a *man* with a mask, did we not?—is very much in evidence again. That is why I have come to see you."

The detective became serious at once, for he saw that Miss Acton was in earnest.

"Do you mean," he asked, "that Henry Hastings is back at his home again?"

"I really don't know exactly what I do mean, Mr. Carter. I think I expressed myself as I wished to do it when I stated that the Woman of the Mask has reappeared. That is precisely the case; but whether 'the woman of the mask' is now represented by the same impersonator as before, I cannot say—although if appearances be true I should say that that were not possible."

"Why?"

"Because General Hastings has cabled to his son, in Paris, who has replied—or has apparently replied; and that would lead one to suppose, would it not, that Henry Hastings is not in this country?"

"Decidedly so."

"The plain truth of the matter is this, Mr. Carter. A midnight prowler has again appeared in our midst at Calvert Park. This time the prowler does not indulge in promiscuous burglaries, as before, and rarely steals anything of value. But the prowler, in person and appearance is the same 'Woman of the Mask' who was among us before, notwithstanding the fact that we have every reason to believe that Henry Hastings, who was the guilty one on that other occasion, is living peacefully and quietly in Europe—in exile."

"You say that since the appearance of this new prowler General Hastings has cabled to his son?"

"Yes."

"And received a reply?"

"Three times."

"So, he cabled more than once to make sure, eh?"

"General Hastings cabled three times. He was not convinced by the first response he received, so he sent a message to the bankers through whom he supplies his son with funds.

"And did the bankers reply that Henry Hastings was in Paris?"

"The bankers directed Henry Hastings to reply for them, in person, which the general considered even a better method."

"Possibly; and the third time—what was that?"

"Another cable to Henry, asking him a question which his father believed that none but himself could answer."

"And he replied to it satisfactorily, I suppose?"

"Perfectly."

"Now, tell me—was the first message sent soon after the appearance of this new prowler among you?"

"Within a few days. As soon as we became convinced that it was necessary to send it."

"How long ago was that?"

"About three weeks."

"Have any letters been exchanged between father and son, since this affair?"

"No letters have been exchanged between them since Henry's disgrace. There has been no word received direct from him since he went away, save the replies to those messages."

"Has the general kept himself posted concerning his son's movements and his habits of life since he was sent to Europe?"

"Only through the bankers."

The detective was thoughtful. Rapidly in his memory, he reviewed the salient features of that other case, of which this one appeared now to be an offshoot. It had been entered in his books under the title of "The Woman of the Mask." He recalled how he had been called to that exclusive suburb known as Calvert Park, the homes of rich men and their families, where a series of mysterious and startling burglaries had been committed by a woman in a mask, who had seemed to possess remarkable knowledge concerning the people who were robbed, and who also, in every instance, showed a perfect acquaintance with the interior of the residences that were burglarized; and the detective remembered how deeply the old general had been wounded when it developed that the thief was not a woman at all, but was no other than his own son, already forty years old, who, having spent his life in idleness, had gambled and raced and betted himself into obligations which he could not meet without stealing.

And when the masquerader was exposed and his father, the general, made good the losses that had been sustained, all had refused to prosecute, and the son had finally been sent away to Europe, with an income sufficient to sustain him, and with the distinct understanding that if he showed his face in his own country again, his allowance would be discontinued, and he would be disinherited as well.

And Nick recalled the fact that there was still another feature of the case—or, rather, two other features of it—that had impressed him at the time.

One of these was the hobby of the old general, now almost in his dotage; and that hobby was his fondness for things medieval. The great stone mansion in which he lived and which was built for him, was honeycombed by secret passages, stairways, doors, and hiding-places, so that no matter how securely the house seemed to be locked, or the individual rooms fastened against intrusion, there were a dozen or more places where the building might be entered with ease; and to one who knew how, the passages from room to room inside the mansion might be made without reference to the visible doors.

The other feature which impressed him now was the existence of the two young ladies who were a part of that household.

One of these—Isabel Acton—was the general's ward; the orphaned daughter of an old comrade in arms, who had gone to live with him when she was still a child and

who had been reared as a daughter of the house, and was regarded as such.

The other—a niece of the general's second wife—Erlina Acosta.

It had developed that Erlina Acosta was deeply in love with the erring son of the house, who was so much her senior, and that she had tried to save him from himself by donning a disguise like his own, and by following him about when he was masquerading in his "woman of the mask" character. And it had further developed that Isabel Acton, having seen and recognized Erlina on one of these occasions, had naturally supposed that she was the burglar, and she had, in her turn, adopted a disguise of the same sort, with the idea that she could save Erlina from the folly of her acts; and so when the denouement came it had been discovered that the "woman of the mask" was not a woman at all, but was none other than Henry Hastings, who had been committing his robberies arrayed in feminine attire.

When the detective spoke again it was to take up an entirely different line of questioning.

"If this new prowler rarely steals anything of value, what is the object of the prowling?" he asked.

"I do not know, Mr. Carter. If I believed in ghosts, I should say that this midnight visitor is not a woman at all, nor yet a man—but a ghost; that her only intention is to frighten us; that there is some ulterior object in view which has not yet appeared."

"You speak as if you were satisfied in your own mind that your visitor is a woman," said the detective.

"I make use of the feminine pronoun because of the costume."

"And is that the same as it was before?"

"Yes."

"Exactly the same?"

"Yes—mask and all. But I may as well tell you at once what happened last night."

"I wish you would do so. We seem to be a long time getting at it."

"You know the general's predeliction for sitting in his study until a late hour at night. You know also that since the revelations in regard to his son, and acting upon your advice, the old gentleman has closed up many of the secret passageways of the house, particularly the one which communicates with his study?"

"Yes."

"Last night he worked later than usual over his manuscripts. He drowsed over his work at last, and must have slept some time; but he was roused suddenly by the consciousness that he was not alone in the room. He opened his eyes and attempted to start from his chair and get upon his feet; but only to discover that he had been securely fastened down where he was seated, and that it was impossible for him to move. And then he saw that directly in front of him, at the opposite side of his table, the masked figure of a woman in black was standing, silently regarding him.

Again he tried to start forward, but the bonds held him so that he could not rise.

"'Confound you, Henry!' he exclaimed, 'have you dared to return here against my wishes, and to resume your thieving practises?'

"The woman—if it was a woman—only laughed at him; that is, her shoulders shook as if she were laughing. Then suddenly she passed around the table to his side and pressed a handkerchief that was saturated with chloroform over his face. And we found him there this morning, bound, gagged, helpless. And that outrage, Mr. Carter, is only one of five that have been committed upon different people of that community within the last fortnight. The Woman of the Mask has been seen seven times during the last three weeks."

CHAPTER II.

THE MOTIVE BEHIND THE ACTS.

"Am I to understand" asked the detective, "that the appearances of the intruder have been only within the home of the general? Has she not shown herself in other places?"

"Yes; she has appeared at Cuthbert's, but beyond taking a few jewels of no great value, she did nothing more really than to show herself. At Pemberton's it was the same, although there she entered the house at a time when Mr. Pemberton was absent. She made her way into Mrs. Pemberton's rooms and frightened the poor woman, who is not overstrong, almost out of her wits. She compelled her to leave her bed and to open the jewel-safe, which stands in one corner of the sleeping-room. Fortunately there happened to be very little of value there at the time, owing to the fact that Mrs. Pemberton that very day had taken most of her best jewels to a safe-deposit vault in the city."

Nick nodded. "That happened just in time, didn't it?" he asked.

"Yes. Mrs. Pemberton, as you may know, is an extremely nervous woman. She recalled the fact that the former Woman of the Mask was a man, and when this masked figure compelled her to leave her bed—well, she was frightened almost to death."

"What was the value of the goods actually taken that night?" asked Nick.

"Not above a thousand dollars. Then there was the robbery at Cooper's."

"Tell me about that."

"The thief selected a time there, also, when Mr. Cooper was away from home. His eldest son was there, but was not awakened, although it was known later that the burglar really entered his room."

"Well?"

"As in the case of the robery at Pemberton's, Mrs. Cooper was calmly awakened from her sleep by the burglar. I say it was done calmly, because it was done deliberately. Mrs. Cooper started from deep sleep to find that the masked woman was standing near her, with a pistol leveled at her head. She had already turned on the lights, so that the room was illuminated."

"In that case she should be able to afford us a very fair description of the intruder."

"The description tallies exactly with that of Henry Hastings, when he masqueraded as a burglar."

"Nevertheless, give it to me over again. There may be some points of difference which have escaped your notice."

Miss Acton smiled.

"I hardly think so," she answered. "However: She wore a close-fitting, stylish gown of black; a black shirt-waist and a black mask so large that it even concealed her ears. Also the same sort of long black gloves which Henry employed to hide his hands. There was not a suggestion of color visible anywhere about her, save the hair—or was it a wig?—which was——"

"Why do you pause?"

"Perhaps to give more emphasis to what I am about to say; it is because of what I am to tell you now and because of the emphasis that has been put upon the statement by some of the people of that neighborhood, that I am here now."

"I see. Go on. You were about to tell me, perhaps, that the masked woman's hair—or wig—is exactly like your own. Is that it?"

"That is it exactly. The same texture, color, quality—everything. They go farther than that. They say that the poise of the head is the same; that she walks across the floor as I do; that her height is the same, her figure the same; in short, there are many among that gossiping community who are quite convinced in their own minds that Isabel Acton and the masked woman burglar are one and the same."

The detective chuckled.

"All that is extremely interesting," he said, smiling at her. "And you must admit that there is a logical reason in the deduction. It is only a little more than three months since you did actually masquerade at times as the Woman of the Mask. You had a good reason and a praiseworthy one for doing it, but that does not alter the fact that you did it. And now that it is known, and has been apparently proved that Henry Hastings is on the other side of the water, while, notwithstanding that fact, the Woman of the Mask has reappeared among you, your own connection with that former affair is remembered—to your discredit. Is that why you have come to me to-day?"

"Yes."

"But you had another reason than that, Miss Acton."

"Yes; there is also another reason. Because I am convinced that behind all this appearance of burglary, that behind the reappearance of the masked woman in our midst, there is a plot of an entirely different character."

The detective nodded. He knew what Isabel meant.

"You refer to the general?" he asked.

"Yes."

He nodded again.

"Miss Acton," he said, "you should have been a detective. You know it is a popular fancy that to be a good detective, one must be an expert at deduction. But there is a greater and much more important quality than that which a good detective should possess; and you have it to a marked degree."

"What is it, Mr. Carter?"

"The power and the discernment to find and to recognize a motive. Do you understand me?"

"Not quite."

"Very well; let us look rather more carefully at this case in hand before we go deeper into it." Nick held up his left hand, with the fingers spread apart, and ticked them off now as he talked.

"First, we have the old case of the Woman of the Mask. There the motive was very simple and was quite apparent. It was robbery pure and simple. But that case is done away with. Because the thief happened to be the son of one of the victims, the offense was smoothed over; but nevertheless the thief was exiled by his own father, driven away from home to live for the rest of his days in a foreign country, upon a small allowance.

"But that case is disposed of, as I have said, although we find that we must look back upon it for a motive, when we consider the present one. Now——

"Second: There is a sudden reappearance of the same sort of thief in the same places, and, according to what you have told me, inside the same houses. The same disguise is worn, and the same personality is aped. But the character of the robberies themselves are different. Now, very little is taken. It would almost appear as if the thief waited until she knew there was very little in the house she robbed to be stolen, and that her visits were timed accordingly. In a word, as if the thieving itself was done merely for sake of keeping up appearances and not at all for the sake of gain.

"Third: You say that there have been eight appearances of the masked woman since this reappearance—if we can call it that; and that five of them have been in the house where you live; that is, in the home of General Hastings."

"Yes. That is true."

"I take it that very little has actually been stolen in all of those five visits."

"Very little indeed."

"But the general has been bound, gagged, and chloroformed. Has he been molested more than that once?"

"He has been visited each of the five times."

"Exactly. Has he lost any of his personal effects—that is, to amount to anything?"

"No. A watch, for which he did not care. He lost nothing of importance until last night; but then——"

"Was his manuscript stolen?"

"You have guessed it; a part of it was taken. The part to which he attaches the most value, too."

"Precisely. Now, to return to what I was outlining."

"Yes."

"Fourth: The person who played the part of the masked woman on that other occasion, we know now to be in Europe, so that he cannot be connected with this case at all. The thief in this case is not actuated by motives of robbery. You have realized all this without stopping to analyze it. But the result has been the same in your mind. You have gone through the barriers in the case and arrived at the motive—the real motive of the reappearance of the masked woman, at a bound. That is why I said that you had the power to find and the wisdom to recognize motives."

"But I do not see any motive here at all, Mr. Carter."

"What! Not after what you just now said to me about a plot behind all these appearances of the masked woman?"

"No."

"Very well, I will pass to the fifth consideration; and as that includes all the fingers I happen to have on one hand, we will stop after this one. Consider for a moment that you are a burglar, professional or amateur, it doesn't matter. You would not select as a field for work, one that has already been threshed over by another, as Calvert Park was by Henry Hastings."

"Hardly."

"If you did select such a place you would not be likely to choose the same sort of disguise that your predecessor used. If you were foolish enough to do both, you would steal, not make a pretense of doing so. You would not find enjoyment in awakening two lone women at times when you knew their protectors were absent—awaking them with the sole and only purpose of frightening them into a recognition of your presence."

"That is quite true."

"Nor would you take the trouble to attack an old man and to chloroform him, and bind him, and gag him, and otherwise maltreat him, for no good reason at all; and, last of all, to steal a lot of worthless manuscript upon which he alone sets any value.

"And, Miss Acton, a person who has done all this has had, as you say, an ulterior object in view all the while. The first and most important factor in that object, is the desire to be seen and recognized as the Woman of the Mask. But the real object is—what do you think it is?"

"Some sort of a plot against the general."

"Certainly; against his life at that. A plot to kill him without doing him bodily harm, if I may use the seeming pardox. A plot to worry him into his grave. A plot to get him into a state of mind where he will be glad to send for his banished son, and a plot to bring all the property he possesses finally into the possession of that son."

"But the son is not here to do all these things. Somebody must be doing it for him, if you are correct in your surmises."

"Certainly."

Isabel started to her feet, and she laughed uneasily.

"Has it occurred to you, Mr. Carter, that, judging from our present knowledge, there are only two persons who could carry out such a plan as you outline?"

"Yes."

"I am one of them."

"Yes," he repated coolly.

"And Erlina Acosta is the other one."

The detective nodded.

"But I will never believe," exclaimed Isabel passionately, "that Erlina Acosta is, or could be, guilty of such a thing."

"Nor I," was the cool reply. "Unless there is a more powerful motive behind the act than we can guess at the present time."

CHAPTER III.

A THREATENING DANGER.

"We must conclude," the detective continued, after a short pause, "that the residence of General Hastings is the hub of the masked woman's operations. We must conclude that her other somewhat abortive efforts at burglary have been planned and carried out solely with the purpose of attracting attention to herself, and, therefore, to distract attention from her real object and aim; and therefore we will eliminate from our consideration everything save what has been done and may still be done within the walls of the Hastings mansion."

Isabel nodded emphatically.

"I think you are right," she said. "I have had all along an intuitive perception of all this, and now it seems quite plain to me. It is all part and parcel with the carrying-out of a plot against my guardian; and——"

"Well?" asked Nick, smiling as she paused in what she was about to say.

"Has it ocurred to you, sir, that although Henry Hastings may not be in this country at the present time, he is still the power behind all this plotting?"

"Certainly. There could be no other solution to it."

"And do you regard it as likely that Erlina is—is the Woman of the Mask, this time?"

"Who knows? What is more likely than it is true?"

"And yet I have just announced that I would never believe that she could be guilty of such a thing; and you have agreed with me."

"I qualified my agreement with you. Don't forget that."

"You said: 'Unless there is a more powerful motive behind the act than we dream of at the present time.'"

"Yes."

"What powerful motive could there be, which we have not already guessed?"

"Possibly we may have guessed it without admitting, even to ourselves, that we have done so."

"I am afraid that I do not understand you now."

"Let us return for a moment to the relations between Erlina and Henry Hastings."

"Yes."

"She is half-Portuguese, is she not? That is, her father was a Portuguese?"

"Yes."

"And we know that she was in love with Henry. There is no reason to believe that she is not still as much in love with him as ever."

"No."

"We know that she continued to love him after she knew that he was a thief, and that she adopted the disguise of the Woman of the Mask in order that she might follow him about, and in so far as she could do so, prevent him from committing crimes. Therefore, she continued to love him after she knew that he was the burglar. Is there any reason then why she should have ceased to love him after he was caught, and others knew as well as she what he had done, do you think?"

"No. If I understand her nature at all, and I think I do, there was all the more reason after that why she should continue to love him."

"While, on the other hand, Henry was never overfond of her, was he?"

"No;" she blushed deeply.

"I had an idea," continued Nick coolly and watching her narrowly as he spoke, "that if Henry Hastings had spoken out in meeting, and told what he really felt, it was *you* whom he loved. I wish you would tell me the truth about it."

She blushed more pronouncedly than ever, and for a moment lowered her eyes.

"You are right," she said at last. "At least, he made professions of love to me."

"I have never doubted it. Tell me how you treated him in return."

"I ignored him as far as it was possible. You must not forget that we lived in the same house, under the same roof, and it was not always possible to avoid or to ignore him."

"I quite understand that."

"Once I threatened to leave the house unless he desisted in his attentions to me. Many times he, in turn, threatened to do things which I cannot tell you about; but underneath our apparent friendliness, there was always downright enmity."

"I have not doubted that either."

"It began," she went on reminiscently, "a year before Erlina came to live with us. I was too young at that time to understand what it mean. I will confess that for a time I was rather proud of the idea that a man so much my senior in years should love me, and should confess his love for me. But I always despised him in a sense; I did so thoroughly as soon as I was old enough to realize what a bad man Henry Hastings always was, at heart."

The detective nodded. He did not care to interrupt her now.

"You must remember, Mr. Carter, that I was placed in a very uncomfortable position. General Hastings could not love me more or be kinder to me if I were his own daughter, and yet the fact is not altered that I was and am, an interloper in that family. Again, the general has let it be understood always that I would one day inherit a large part of his fortune. Of course, Henry resented that, and of course I have always felt that in awaiting that inheritance I was somehow depriving Henry of his rights.

"I even went so far as to discuss the matter one day with the general. I told him that it would be better for all concerned if he did not remember me in his will more than with a small legacy which could offend nobody. He told me plainly to mind my own business, and that he should leave his money as he pleased, in his will. He also told me at that time of his intention to make me an equal sharer with Henry in the estate."

"Go on," said Nick. "There was more said. I would like to hear it all, for unless I am greatly mistaken, it bears upon the present case."

"He told me at that interview," continued Isabel, "that until very lately he had hoped that, since Henry was a bachelor, I might become fond of him and marry him, notwithstanding the difference in our ages."

"And you replied to that—what?"

"I did not have to reply to it. He went right on. He said that lately he had become aware of the sort of life his son was living, and that he would as soon see me in my coffin as the wife of Henry Hastings. He even went so far as to explain to me that he intended to leave Henry's inheritance in such a manner that it would be tied up in the hands of trustees, so that the principal could not be wasted.

"Now, Mr. Carter, the point of all this is that not long afterward I discovered that Henry had been eavesdropping during that interview, and had heard everything that passed between us."

"Good!" exclaimed the detective. "We are getting at it now. How did you find out that Henry had been listening?"

"He told me of it himself."

"When?"

"That same evening."

"Where?"

"In my own apartment in the mansion. He came and rapped on my door, which I opened, unthinkingly. Before I could close it again he had forced his way into the room and closed the door behind him. Everybody else in the house had retired. I had been seated in my sitting-room, reading."

"And then——? Go on, please. Tell me about that scene. It may mean a great deal to us in unraveling this plot."

"I saw that he was enraged, and greatly excited, when he entered the room. When he closed the door, and put his back against it, he also locked it, and withdrew the key, which he put in his pocket. I saw then that he had been drinking heavily."

"Bracing up his courage," murmured the detective.

"Yes."

"Now tell me what he said."

"He began by telling me, jeeringly, that he had overheard everything that had been said between his father and me. He charged me with being a plotter against his fortune—with being a schemer to possess the millions which should rightfully go to him; and with it all he still professed love for me, and told me that all would be well if I would consent to become his wife.

"I am not a timid woman, Mr. Carter, and even though he had locked the door, and had put the key in his pocket, I was not afraid of him—and, besides, as you know, there was another way out of the room, through the secret entrance that you know about."

"Yes," said the detective.

"I laughed at him, of course. I scorned him, and scoffed him until I got him into a rage. After a while, when our interview had reached a stage where he was thoroughly angry, and, being inflamed by the drink, he had consumed, was, therefore, reckless of what he did, he sprang upon me before I realized what he was about to do, and seized me."

"Go on," said the detective.

"I struck him then; struck him so hard that it staggered him, and he almost fell to the floor. At least, the act gave me the opportunity to get past him, and I sprang toward that walnut cabinet which you remember, touched the spring that controls the mechanism and escaped into the secret passageway before he realized what I was doing. I pulled the secret door shut after me, and then I stood there listening.

"I could hear him swearing on the opposite side of the wall while he searched for the secret of the mechanism; but I knew that he did not know where to find it or how to work it if he should discover it; and so I waited there until he gave it up, and went away. Then I slipped quietly back into my own room again, and locked and bolted the outer door.

"But that was the beginning of our real enmity, although, as if by mutual consent, it was never outspoken in the presence of others, and we concealed our quarrel from everybody.

"From that time on, however, Henry never neglected an opportunity to annoy me, and he managed to accomplish it in a thousand petty ways which were extremely disagreeable.

"It was soon after that when he began to pay his addresses to Erlina, and I saw with grief that she not only accepted the advances he made, but that she was really in love with him.

"On one occasion I attempted to remonstrate with her, but I found that Henry had already succeeded in prejudicing her against me, and that he had succeeded in giving her the impression that I would be only too glad of his attentions did he choose to give them to me.

"You will readily see that such an idea, held by Erlina, placed me in an anomalous position; in one which a girl of any pride will bitterly resent—and the result was that I left both of them entirely to their own devices until the time came when the Woman of the Mask was stirring up the entire community. Do you need to hear any more of that history?"

"Yes. Go on. Tell it all to me."

"There is very little more to tell. Without in any way spying upon their actions or intending to do so, I still kept rather a careful watch over them; and it was because of that watching that I finally came to believe that Erlina Acosta was the real Woman of the Mask.

"You must remember, Mr. Carter, that Erlina was and is a poor girl. She has no money of her own. It is not known whether the general intends to remember her or not. There is a belief on her part that he does not—and there, I think, you have the nucleus of the entire affair."

"Now tell me," said the detective, "what was your real reason for coming here to tell me all this to-day."

"I came," she replied slowly, "because I am convinced that the life of General Hastings is threatened. Because I believe that if something is not done at once to protect him, the time will not be long before we will find him dead in his bed some morning, or—I believe, Mr. Carter, that the plotters mean to murder him. There you have it in plain English. I have come to you to protect him, because I think that his son means to kill him. Will you help me?"

"Of course I will help you."

"Thank you, sir. Then I know that everything will be all right."

CHAPTER IV.

THE ATTACK IN THE SECRET PASSAGE.

"Who beside yourself knows about this call upon me, Miss Acton?" asked the detective.

"Nobody," she replied.

"You have told no one?"

"Not a soul."

"Do you think that if it has occurred to Miss Acosta to wonder where you have gone to-day, she might suspect that you have come here to see me?"

"It is possible; but I do not think so. And yet——"

"And yet—what?"

"She has herself suggested that we should consult you."

"Indeed! When was that?"

"A week ago, or more."

"Has the idea been suggested or referred to again, since that time?"

"No."

"What reply did you make at the time?"

"I don't remember. I know that I did not encourage it."

"Why not?"

"Because I already had the idea of coming to you, and preferred to do it as I have done it now; without the knowledge of any other person."

"You did not even tell General Hastings, or suggest it to him?"

"No."

"Have you discussed with him this second appearance of the masked woman?"

"Yes; several times."

"What does he have to say about it?"

"He believes thoroughly that the visitations are made by a regular burglar, who has borrowed the idea from his son's acts. He will have nothing whatever done about it for the reason that to do so would revive all the unpleasant notoriety connected with the banishment of Henry from his home."

"I understand," said the detective. "It is a sore spot with the old man—and no wonder. What attitude does Mrs. Hastings take? The general's wife?"

"None at all, save unbelief. She has not seen the masked woman. She has lost nothing. She gives it as her opinion that we all imagine it. In fact, she ignores the whole thing."

Nick pondered a moment; then he said:

"You tell me that General Hastings, acting upon my advice, has closed up some of the secret passages with which the house is honeycombed. What ones have been closed and what remain?"

"He has closed and sealed forever, that one which leads from his study to the outside; the one through the floor, you know——"

"Yes."

"Also that one connected with the apartment formerly occupied by Henry Hastings. There remains only one of the secret entrances from outside that I know about. There may be others of which I have never been informed."

"What is your opinion as to that?"

"I think there must be one other, although the general has told me emphatically that there is not."

"And which is the one that remains as it was?"

"The entrance to my own rooms. That is as it was. Nothing has been done to it."

"How about the secret passages inside the house? Those that communicate from room to room? Do those remain as they were?"

"Yes. In effect; although, as you know, there are means of locking them all, and I know of their being securely locked."

"Do you happen to know where the general keeps his private papers?"

"No; nobody knows that, exactly. Somewhere in his study; that is, somewhere in a hiding-place that is connected with his study. But that is a secret which he has not revealed, even to me."

"And that is probably the place where he keeps his will?"

"Without doubt."

"Now, what time is the general in the habit of retiring to his study, in the evening?"

"He usually goes there now, directly after dinner, in the evening."

"And what time is he in the habit of vacating the study in order to retire to his sleeping-room, and go to bed?"

"Usually about midnight. Sometimes it is later, often it is not so late."

"I believe that you have entire confidence in me, Miss Acton?"

"Yes," she replied simply.

"Then I am going to ask you to do a strange thing to-night. I want you to admit me to the house, soon after midnight, through the secret entrance which passes through the parlor of your private suite. Will you do that?"

"Yes."

"If nothing comes of it to-night I wish you to repeat the act every night until there is an opportunity for me to catch the masked woman at her work. Will you also do that?"

"Certainly. I was intending to suggest it myself."

"I can approach the mansion through the grounds without being seen. To-night at midnight I will be at the secret entrance outside the house, and I will wait there until you descend to admit me."

"Very well, sir."

"After that, I will go to the general's study and wait

here in the dark for something to happen. It may be that we shall have to repeat the experience many times before something comes of it; but that something eventually will happen, there can be no doubt. And, at all events, I will be on hand to capture the masked woman or to protect the general, should he be in any danger—and sooner or later we will lay this ghost."

"I don't know how to thank you, Mr. Carter."

"You can thank me by giving me your assistance, Miss Acton—*and by keeping yourself as much out of danger as possible.*"

He made the latter part of his remark with such emphasis that she looked at him in surprise. Then she said:

"You don't really believe that I am in any personal danger, do you?"

"I am afraid you are—in imminent danger," he replied quietly.

"From what? From whom?"

"Have you forgotten that Henry Hastings knows that you are to inherit a large part of the estate of his father? Has it not occurred to you that if you are mentioned in the will, and should die before he does, the property would all go to Henry—save that which was provided for in some specific way? Have you forgotten that the masked woman, in imitating the other woman of the house, has chosen to make herself appear as much like you as possible? I think if you stop to consider all these things you will agree with me that danger menaces every step you take."

"I had not thought of it in that light before," she said quietly.

"It is time that you should think of it. Whether Henry Hastings loved you or not, it is quite certain that he now has no hope of winning you, and has, therefore, given you up finally. That being the case, and with the knowledge that you will come in for a large part of his father's estate, it is not unlikely that he will make a desperate effort, in case he cannot alter the will, or substitute another one for it, to get you out of the way before the time comes for the old man to die; and if there happens to be a woman in the house who is working with him, she is on hand all the time, ready and prepared to carry out the directions that Henry Hastings gives her. Now, don't be frightened at what I have said."

"I will not."

"And don't fail to be on hand to-night, at twelve, or some time, to admit me to the house."

"I will be ready."

* * * * * * *

A clock somewhere in the distance was striking midnight that night, when Nick Carter leaped the palings of the fence which surrounded General Hastings' spacious grounds, and glided swiftly among the shadows cast by the bushes toward the gloomy walls of the mansion.

He knew exactly where that secret entrance to which he had referred in his talk with Isabel was located, although he had never passed through it himself; but Chick had done so, and the location of it, and its character, had been explained to him more than once.

Entrance was had through a passage that was opened by the movement of one of the larger stones of the foundation. This stone swung out upon a pivot, and it fitted into its place so nicely that not a trace of the entrance could be found from the outside, even in the strongest light of day.

From inside, the latch which held the pivotal stone in place could easily be found; but outside the secret of the mechanism was so perfectly concealed, and yet was so simple, that it had defied the efforts of every one to find it until it was disclosed.

The movable stone in the foundation was located directly under the blinds which covered a false window. To work the mechanism, one had merely to open the left half of those blinds. The latch that held the stone was removed by that act, and after that one had only to press against the right side of the stone to make it swing open.

Nick Carter was aware of all this, although he had never worked it himself; but it had been thoroughly explained to him; and, anyhow, he did not suppose that he would have to make use of the mechanical part of the contrivance, since Isabel had agreed to meet him there, and admit him as soon after midnight as she could come.

His business was to wait till she should appear; and for that purpose, as soon as he was close enough to the house so that he could keep his eye upon the movable stone, he dropped upon the grass in the shadow beside a lilac-bush.

When a quarter of an hour had passed without a sign of Isabel's appearance on the scene, he began to feel some impatience. He had noticed when he passed the house, a few minutes before twelve, that it was dark and had given the outward appearance that every one within it had retired. He had, therefore, not expected to be obliged to wait long.

But when half an hour had passed, and Isabel had not come, he began to wonder.

"And yet," he argued to himself, "there are many reasons why she may have been detained. The general is probably still in his study. Possibly she does not like the idea of admitting me until he has also gone to his room."

At a quarter of one he rose and crossed to the movable stone in the foundation, more than half-determined to operate the mechanism and pass inside; and then he stopped, thinking that as long as Isabel had not appeared she, of course, had a good reason for not coming. He resumed his seat and waited another quarter of an hour.

"One o'clock," he remarked, rising a second time, and

determined now to enter the passageway and wait there, if there was any more waiting to be done.

Still he hesitated for a moment; and then, resolutely he opened the left half of the blind that covered the false window; then he pressed sharply against the half of the stone as directed to do, and he was relieved when he saw it move slowly, revealing an aperture of sufficient size for him to pass through it in perfect safety and with ease.

Determining in his own mind that he would not make use of his pocket electric light until after he had entered and closed the mechanism behind him, he passed through, stepped beyond the edge of the swinging rock, and slowly swung the heavy substance shut behind him.

He heard the click of the latch as it fell into place, and, knowing that the rock was locked fast where it should be, he reached into his pocket for the light, in order to find his way with its help along the secret passage.

And then—something fell upon him. A crushing blow seemed to crash upon him from above. He knew that it was coming, but there was no time to avoid it or to dodge it. But he reached out, and as he fell he clutched what felt like the garments of a woman in his grasp.

And that was all he knew; all that he ever remembered about that particular incident.

CHAPTER V.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF NICK CARTER.

The reader will remember that Chick was in the room with Nick Carter at the time Isabel Acton took her call upon the detective, but that the detective succeeded in alone to receive his visitor.

It so happened that after Isabel Acton left the house, Nick Carter did not see any more of his three assistants before he went out, that night to keep the appointment he had made with her at midnight, as already described. The reason for this was that Chick had departed almost as soon as his chief left him, to keep an engagement in Harlem, from which he did not expect to return for several days.

It also happened that Ten-Ichi and Patsy were out of the house at the same time, at work on another affair which the detective had in hand, and that neither of them returned until late that night—long after the detective had left the house to go to Calvert Park.

And Nick Carter said nothing to Joseph about the purpose of his errand out.

He might have done so—he doubtless would have done so had Joseph been at his accustomed post when the detective went out; but Joseph did not happen to be there, and as the detective left no word concerning the probable time of his return home.

Patsy was the first one to return that night. He expected to find his chief at home, and expressed some surprise to Joseph that he was not there or had left no word.

But Joseph explained that he had been temporarily away from his post at the time of the chief's departure, which doubtless accounted for it.

An hour later Ten-Ichi came in.

The two went into the library to play chess until the master should return; but they played on, long into the night, and still he had not come—and at last they went to bed.

When morning came and they met at the breakfast-table, the chief had not appeared; but even yet they thought nothing of it, for it was not an unusual thing for Nick to be detained by a case he was working upon, although it was his inevitable habit, when he could do so, to communicate with somebody at home in order not only to inform them where he was, but to find out what was happening in his absence.

But the morning passed away and there came no message of any sort from him; at luncheon Patsy and Ten-Ichi began to express some wonder to each other that nothing had been heard from him, and that he had left no message as to where he was going.

Neither of them had anything to do that day, which was all the more reason why their master would have left some sort of directions for them, they thought; and they sat around the house, reading, playing chess, and otherwise killing time as best they could.

But when the day deepened into afternoon and the afternoon faded into evening and still no tidings came from the detective, they began to feel some alarm.

Patsy was the first one to express the thought; and he began it by exclaiming suddenly:

"What in the world do you suppose has become of the chief?"

Ten-Ichi raised his eyes from the book he was reading, studied the ceiling a moment, and then quietly replied:

"Give it up, Patsy," and went on reading again.

"I begin to feel as if something had happened to him," said Patsy, now thoroughly aroused.

"Why?" asked Ten-Ichi.

"Because it is so entirely unlike him to go out in that way without leaving a sign of direction for us, and not to return. If he had intended to be gone this long, he would have said something about it, I'm sure."

"Well, he may not have intended to be gone long at the time he went out, and still something may have happened to detain him after he left the house," suggested Ten-Ichi.

"That is true enough; but, all the same, I feel uneasy."

"Why don't you have Joseph in and ask him about it?" asked the Jap.

Patsy lost no time in doing that very thing. He rang the bell for Joseph, who quickly appeared.

"Joe," he said to him, "what do you suppose has happened to the chief, to keep him so long away?"

"I haven't an idea, Mr. Patrick," was the dignified reply.

"Didn't he say a word to you when he went out?"

"I was not here for him to say it, sir."

"Have you any idea where he went to?"

"No, sir."

"Who was here at the house to see him yesterday?"

"There wasn't anybody at all, sir, only a young lady, who remained about an hour, possibly a little longer than that, and then went quietly away. She was here during the early part of the afternoon, and the chief did not go out until late in the evening. That is, it was after nine."

"Then it is certain that he didn't go to Boston with Chick?"

"Certainly it is."

"Or follow him there, eh?"

"He would scarcely have done that, sir, without leaving some word about it. It is true that I happened to be out on an errand at the moment, but if he had been intending to go out of town he would have informed one of the other servants."

"That's what I think."

"I am quite sure, sir, that he had no engagement. There was nothing on the docket for him and nothing happened during the day to call him out."

"What about the telephone? He might have been called out suddenly in that way."

"I hardly think so. There was no telephone for him all the afternoon; and I was not out to exceed fifteen minutes last night. He went during that time."

"And that woman you mentioned was the only client he received yesterday?"

"Yes, sir; and I am not at all sure that she was even a client. I think she came in regard to that old case about the Woman of the Mask, and that was done away with three months ago."

"Eh? What's that?" interjected Ten-Ichi.

"I heard something said between the master and Mr. Chick, when I carried up the woman's card," explained Joseph. "I remember what was on the card."

"What was it?" asked Ten-Ichi; "and what did the chief and Chick have to say to each other about it at the time?"

"The name on the card was 'Miss Isabel Acton, Fort Row, Calvert Park.' That last was down in the left-hand corner."

"Of course. Now what was said between the chief and Chick at the time?"

It was Ten-Ichi who was doing the questioning now, and Joseph replied:

"Mr. Chick wondered what had happened now; and something was said about its being rather more than three months since this young woman had assisted them in the case of the Woman of the Mask."

"Is that all, Joseph?" asked Patsy.

"Yes, sir."

"Did the chief go down at once to see Miss Acton?"

"Yes, sir."

"And she was here about an hour, you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did he see Chick again after she had gone?"

"No. Chick went out in the meantime, to get his train for Boston."

"And didn't the chief go out at all after that, until he left the house after nine o'clock?"

"No, sir."

"That will be about all, Joseph;" but after he had gone out Patsy turned to Ten-Ichi.

"What is your idea about it, Ten-Ichi?" he asked.

"My idea is that we had better mind our own business. The chief it pretty well able to take care of himself, and if there had been anything about the affair that took him out which he wished us to know, he would have told us about it or have sent word. As it is, he has done neither, and if we meddle he may not thank us for it."

But Patsy shook his head sagely.

"It isn't at all like him," he said stubbornly. "I remember something about that case, although I had nothing to do with it. There was a series of burglaries at a place called Calvert Park, which is one of the suburbs of Brooklyn. It is frightfully aristocratic, and it turned out that a son of one of the richest residents—old General Hastings—was the burglar. He had been in the habit of disguising himself in women's clothing and doing the act in that manner. It all comes back to me now."

"Go on. Tell me all about it. I don't think I know about the case."

"No; you were on that San Francisco school matter at the time You weren't at home."

"What was there about the case, Patsy?"

"General Hastings is a retired army officer. He is quite old now. He has got a young wife now; that is, she is about half his age—say forty. Then there was the son—Henry was his name—who was the burglar. There is—or was—a niece of Mrs. Hastings in the house who was in love with Henry, and she had made some sort of a bluff at playing burglar, too, it appeared, to prevent her lover from stealing. She is young and pretty, very dark; a Portuguese, I believe."

"Who is Isabel Acton—the woman of the card?"

"The general's ward; daughter of an old comrade; raised in the family and treated as a daughter; expectations of inheriting evenly with the son; a blonde—beautiful as a dream, so Chick told me."

"And what became of the son, who was the burglar?"

"Oh, he was banished. No complaint was made against him. The old man gave him a bone to pick on, and sent him abroad. It all happened three—almost four, months ago."

"Have you heard the chief say anything about that case lately?"

"Never a word."

"And Miss Acton called here yesterday. 'Depend upon it, Patsy, she came here upon some business connected with that old case."

"That is exactly what I think; but you said a moment ago that we had better mind our own business, and——"

"And that is precisely what we are doing, isn't it. Have you ever met any of those people over there, at Calvert Park, Pat?"

"I have not."

"What time is it now?"

Patsy looked over Ten-Ichi's head toward the clock and replied:

"Half-past eight."

"Shall we go to Calvert Park, Pat?"

"Eh? What for?"

"We might make a call on the old general."

"What for?"

"We might ask after the health of his banished son—or was he transported?"

"We'd look nice, going there, wouldn't we, without a word of excuse for our impertinence? And suppose the chief should happen to be there and shouldn't like it because we butted in upon things that don't concern us—what then?"

"We could still have called upon the old general and have asked after the health of his thieving son," was the quiet reply.

"What are you getting at, Ten-Ichi?" demanded Patsy. "Do you think that we ought really to do that thing?"

"I really do, Pat. We'll start for Calvert Park now. When we get over there, we'll stop in a drug-store and ring up Joseph to ask if the chief has returned yet. If he has not gotten home by that time—*we will make our call upon the general.*"

CHAPTER VI.

A HOUSE OF MYSTERY.

When the two young detectives arrived in the neighborhood of the general's house, they did telephone to Joseph before attempting the call they had decided upon; but the wire-operator did not answer them, for Joseph had, of course, heard nothing from his master.

"Then it is up to us to make that call," said Patsy, when Ten-Ichi returned to him with Joseph's message; and presently they stood in front of the mansion, which was partly hidden by the trees that surrounded it.

"Shall we both go in?" asked Patsy. "Or shall I wait here while you go?"

"Neither," replied Ten-Ichi. "I will wait here, outside the house, while you go in and make the inquiries."

Patsy shrugged his shoulders. He did not relish the job, for there was always the chance that they were making a mistake for which their master would not thank them; but, on the other hand, he did feel a depth of anxiety that he had not confessed, and he feared that something had happened to his beloved chief.

"All right," he said. "But tell me what sort of a bluff am I to throw?"

Ten-Ichi grinned.

"Tell whoever comes to the door that you are Nick Carter's assistant, and that your master has strangely and unaccountably disappeared, and that you are out on a still hunt looking for clues; and that——"

"Go to blazes!" exclaimed Patsy; and he turned away.

Simpson, the butler, came to the door in response to his ring, and Patsy, who was never at a loss when a real emergency was at hand, extended his card and said:

"Be good enough to take that to Miss Acton, if you please."

"Miss Acton is not at home, sir," was the quiet reply.

"No?" said Patsy. "All right. Take it to the general, then."

"General Hastings is not receiving to-night. He is indisposed. In fact, sir, he is——"

A voice from the interior of the house interrupted him.

"Who is there, Simpson?" it demanded; and then, before Simpson could make any reply, a darkly beautiful face appeared beside Simpson, and the young woman inquired: "Who do you wish to see, sir?"

Patsy was now thoroughly alive to the fact that something had happened inside that house, and he was determined to find out what it was. He replied:

"I called to see General Hastings. I came from Nicholas Carter, the detective."

The young woman stared at him for a moment without replying; and then she stepped back a trifle from the doorway, and said:

"Come inside, please. I will receive your message."

Patsy followed her through the wide hall to the library, and there, near the table, she turned and faced him.

"Now, sir, what is your business?" she demanded, but she asked the question only as if she were slightly curious. Still, Patsy believed that he could detect behind her calm bearing [illegible] and immediately more interest in her question than she cared to show.

"My business is with General Hastings," he replied mildly.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Your first inquiry was for Miss Acton," she reminded him, showing that she had overheard it.

"That is true," he replied. "But you are not Miss Acton. You are Miss Acosta, are you not?"

She inclined her head in an affirmative, and asked again:

"Will you tell me your business?"

Now, had she approached this insistent question by different methods, it would not have occurred to Patsy to deny her an answer; but as it was, he was already impressed by a suspicion that all was not as it should be within that house. And while he hesitated she continued:

"The fact that you came from the detective, Nick Carter, surprises me, because it is not fifteen minutes since I telephoned to his residence in New York. I was told that he was not at home, but that my message would be delivered to him as soon as he returned. You are not Nick Carter. I know that quite as well as you know that I am not Miss Acton. Will you be so good as to tell me who you are?"

"I am Nick Carter's assistant," replied Patsy, still regarding her suspiciously. He did not in the least like her manner or the expression of her eyes, although he could not have given a logical reason why he objected to either.

"Ah!" she said. "Then you are——" she stopped, and Patsy did not supply the missing name. He regarded it as quite sufficient that he was the detective's assistant. And when she realized that he would not assist her over the difficulty, she added:

"Will you tell me why you are here? Did Nick Carter send you here?"

"Madam," said Patsy slowly, "I have told you quite plainly that I have business with General Hastings. I have said that I came from Nick Carter. That seems to me to both your questions; and now, may I see the general?"

"The general is not at home. Did not the butler tell you that?"

"No. He said that the general was not receiving and that he was also indisposed. He also was on the point of saying something else, when you interrupted him. With your permission I will retire, and carry the message to Mr. Carter that I was not permitted to see the general."

She bowed, and the ghost of a smile played for a moment around the corners of her mouth.

"You are, by all means," she said, and she stepped aside for him to pass.

And now there seemed to be nothing else for Patsy to do but to leave the house, no wiser than when he entered it. In fact, there was nothing else for him to do—absolutely nothing else; and so he strode past her toward the hallway again. He was angry at himself for being so easily dismissed after having gained a foothold, so to speak, inside the house.

But he could think of no excuse for remaining longer; and since this young woman with the glowing black eyes refused to permit him to see either Miss Acton or the old general, he could only go quietly away unless, indeed, he blurted out all that he feared in his heart in regard to his master; and this, of course, he would not do.

He had left his hat in the hall, with Simpson, and now as he walked forward to discovered that the butler was standing holding it in his hand ready to give to him; and he could fancy that there was a sarcastic smile on Simpson's face as he did so.

He would have enjoyed an opportunity just then to have slapped that butler's face; but as he glanced downward to take his hat from the man he saw that something white gleamed in the bottom of it, a bit of white paper that had evidently been dropped there by the butler himself.

And in that instant he remembered that Simpson had tried to tell him more about the general at the moment when he was interrupted by the approach of Miss Acosta, and like a flash he saw in the presence of that bit of paper in his hat another method of communication which the butler had adopted while he was himself engaged inside the library by that very unsatisfactory young woman.

He took the hat without a word, and with a slight inclination of his head, he passed outside, and the door closed quickly behind him.

"*Gee!*" exclaimed Patsy, and he shook himself like a dog that has just come out of the water. "For a cold proposition, commend me to that young woman. She's a corker!"

Then he hurried down the path to the gate, beyond which Tar-leh was awaiting him and near which there was an electric light underneath which he knew he would be able to read what had been written in the note.

It was only a scrawl, and Tar-leh leaned forward and read it at the same time.

"Wait somewhere outside for me until I can manage to get out to see you."

That was all it said. It was evident that Simpson had written it hurriedly, fearing that he would be interrupted before he could complete what he had to say; but it was enough.

"There is something wrong inside of that house, Tar-leh," said Patsy, after he had taken in the full meaning of the note. "I know it—I sensed it the minute the door opened. I think that butler fellow would have told me if he dared to about it, if he had not been interrupted. And what he realized that I came from Nick Carter—or, at least, that I said I did, he was determined as he knew what to do."

And then he told in detail all that had happened since the moment of his admittance to the house; nor did he spare himself when it came to the point of relating how he had dismissed himself from the premises.

"But we will wait for the butler," he concluded; and they did wait.

It was ten o'clock, lacking only a few moments, when Patsy came out of the house. It was midnight before from a place of concealment they had selected they discovered the dark figure of the butler stealing through the gloom toward them.

He did not discover their proximity until he was close upon them and Patsy had reached out and seized him by the arm, and then he nearly shrieked aloud in his fright.

But he recovered in an instant.

"You startled me," he said. "Now, sir, is it true that you are from Nick Carter?"

"Quite true," replied Ten-Ichi. "We are both his assistants."

"But he could not have sent you here, gentlemen."

"Why?"

"The time is not long enough since we telephoned from the house for him."

"Oh! Well, you are right about that."

"Look here," said Patsy, breaking in abruptly. "I want to know what is the matter inside that house and I want you to tell me."

"I don't know what is the matter, sir. It is all very mysterious. To begin with, something happened here last night. It was about midnight or soon after that, when I heard noises. I usually sleep very soundly, but last night I was restless, and all the fore part of the night I thought that I heard strange noises in the house. Then, in the middle of the night, I am sure that I heard a pistol-shot. I laid still for a long time after that, listening, but I heard nothing more, and at last I got up and went out into the hall. There I met Miss Acosta face to face. She looked scared, and when I asked her what was the matter, she replied that Miss Acton had been taken suddenly ill. I asked if there was anything that I could do, and she told me 'no,' and ordered me back to bed.

"Late this morning, sir, when I got up and went, as is my custom, to the rooms of General Hastings to wait upon him—for he will have nobody but me—they would not admit me at all. I was told that the general was ill—much too ill to see me.

"He has never, in all the years that I have lived with him, and they are many, refused to see me before, and I could not understand it. I tried to force my way into the room, but I did not succeed—only I did get far enough to see the general lying propped against his pillow. The room was very dark, but I could see him enough to recognize that it was him.

"'Can't I come in, sir?' I called out to him; and I heard him reply, in a voice that I barely recognized: 'Go away, Simpson.'

"Well, sir, he had given the order, and I went away. Then a new doctor came to the house—one whom I have never seen before; a foreign-looking man—like a Frenchman; and after he had attended to General Hastings, he was taken to Miss Acton's rooms to see her.

"Now, sir, that man was not the family doctor at all, and neither Miss Acton or the general would ever before consent to have anybody but their regular doctor attend them. So I watched my chance and telephoned to Doctor Schuyler; but when I told him the story and that another doctor was in the house, do you think he would come? Not much! He said that they would send for him if he was wanted, and with that he hung up the phone.

"That is all, sir. But there is something strange going on inside that house. I am sure of that. Some sort of deviltry, I know. I wish you would not go away and leave me. I wish you would help me to find out what it all means."

"We will," replied Patsy quickly. "Smuggle us inside the house, any way you please, and we will do the rest; for I quite agree with you, Simpson, something is decidedly wrong in there."

CHAPTER VII.

PATSY'S STARTLING DISCOVERY.

In a suburban locality like Calvert Park everything is more or less "dead" by midnight, unless it happens to be the occasion of some sort of function at one of the houses.

On this particular night nothing seemed stirring at all. The lights in the adjacent houses had been extinguished, and save for the paved street and the somewhat infrequent electric lights along them, the locality had almost the appearance of a country town.

Simpson made his arrangements for admitting the two young detectives to the house quickly.

And then, as soon as that was done, he glided swiftly away, leaving Patsy and Ten-Ichi in their place of concealment among the shrubbery.

The two waited in utter silence for the greater part of half an hour after Simpson left them, and then from a window, which had been indicated to them by the butler, they saw a light flash up, go out, flash up, go out again, and flash a third time for a somewhat longer interval.

It was Simpson's signal that he was ready for them, and with Patsy leading the way, they silently and swiftly skirted the house, and, strangely enough, went almost directly to the very spot where, twenty-four hours before that, Nick Carter had searched for and found the mechanism of the secret entrance to the house, where, as we know, he was attacked upon entering.

It was here that Simpson had told them to wait after they should have seen the flashing of his signal.

It will be remembered that there was a false window

have covered by blinds—the same blinds that Nick Carter had used in working the mechanism before referred to.

Directly above this false window, on the second floor of the house, there was a real one, and this the two young detectives now perceived to be slowly lifting.

A moment later the butler's head protruded from it, and he called out softly to them:

"Catch what I throw to you."

It was the end of a rude rope-ladder. This Ten-Ichi seized when he stepped forward in response to Simpson's exclamation, and a moment later, closely followed by Patsy, he had run up it and passed through the window into the house and out of sight.

Simpson received them both in silence, but with an admonitory pressure of his fingers upon their arms; and then he guided them safely from the small room into which they had made their entrance, through the hallway, and up a winding flight of steep stairs in the rear of the house, until they finally entered a small and snug apartment, which at once gave evidence of being Simpson's own.

Here, feeling that there was no danger of discovery, Simpson turned up the light and began to scrutinize with exceeding care the countenances of his two new-made friends.

Already, since he had left them outside the house, having promised to admit them to it by stealth, he had felt some misgivings about the act.

It was not so long since the community had been stirred by the recurrence of frequent burglaries, and Simpson, wise in his generation, had thought after he left Patsy that instead of being friends of Nick Carter's, as they claimed to be, these two strangers might be nothing more than burglars who had conceived this plot and plan as a means of robbery.

He was, however, presently undeceived, and his confidence quickly returned.

"Why do you bring us here?" asked Patsy, impatient to investigate the interior of the house at once, now more firmly convinced than he had ever been that the mysteries connected with this place had something, if not everything, to do with the disappearance of Nick Carter.

"Because," replied Simpson, "it is not safe yet for you to be going about the house. I am quite sure that Miss Acosta has not yet retired, and she might discover you. When I returned, after going outside to talk with you, she was on the watch waiting for me. I even think that she was suspicious that I might have had some design in going out."

"We will wait a few moments," Ten-Ichi remarked quietly. "There is no necessity for hurry, now that we are inside the building."

"I'm for not waiting at all," insisted Patsy. "It is almost one o'clock now. Simpson, can you draw me on this sheet of paper, a rough plan of the locality of the rooms of the house?"

"What do you wish to know?" asked Simpson.

"I want to know first where Miss Acton's rooms are located; next where General Hastings' rooms may be found, and I want to know particularly where Miss Acosta's rooms are; and, by the way, Simpson——"

"Yes?"

"One of the things that we have heard about this house is that it is filled, honeycombed, in fact, with secret passages, hiding-places, mysterious doors, and all that. I want to know if you are familiar with any of these passageways and secret doors, and with the mechanism that controls them?"

"No," said Simpson, "I am not."

"But I had supposed that being an old servant of the general's you might know of some of them?"

"I do not," said Simpson. "I know where many of them are, and what parts of the house they connect with, that is, some of them. But I have never been told their secrets, and I do not know the mechanism of any of them."

While he was talking, he had seized the pencil which Patsy gave him, and had applied himself to the sheet of paper already designated; and he was now rapidly sketching with more dexterity than either of the detectives had supposed he possessed, a rough plan of the second and third floors of the building.

On the second floor he showed the location of Isabel Acton's suite of rooms, of the general's, and of Mrs. Hastings—the two latter occupying one entire side of the building. Directly above Isabel Acton's suite was the one occupied by Erlina Acosta. This was on the third floor, and on this same floor, across the hall and at the other extremity of it, were the apartments formerly occupied by Henry Hastings, now banished from his home to live in Paris.

Patsy stood over the man while he was drawing the plan and interposed many questions concerning them, while the drafting proceeded.

Ten minutes later he turned away from the table, having absorbed, with entire comprehension, the details he desired, and, with a curt, "I wish you would both wait here for me," he himself quietly went out of the door, and was gone.

It will be remembered that it was Patsy's determination, when the thought first came to him to visit Calvert Park, to see and to question Isabel Acton.

The story that Simpson had told to him so halting outside the preceding night, and that she had been kept secluded in her rooms during the entire day that had just passed, yielded by a stranger and, in quite a different—

foreign-looking doctor, had only whetted his desire to know what she might have to say about the errand that had taken her to New York to see the detective.

Patsy believed that if he could see Isabel Acton, and could have three minutes' conversation with her, the mystery, or, at least a part of the mystery of the disappearance of Nick Carter, would be explained.

He felt that he knew something about Isabel Acton, notwithstanding the fact that he had never seen her or spoken with her in his life; and from what he did know, he did not believe that she was the sort of young woman to be taken violently ill in the middle of the night and to consent willingly to treatment by a stranger, and submit to the mysterious seclusion with which she was surrounded.

He remembered, too, now that his whole mind was centered upon the duties he was performing, that reference had been made in the past by Nick Carter and Chick both, to a secret passage which connected with Isabel Acton's rooms from the outside of the house.

In a word, he was convinced that if he could see Isabel Acton, everything would be made easier for him.

It is not a pleasant thing to do, to approach by stealth the sleeping apartments of a young woman, in the middle of the night.

There were a thousand reasons why Patsy should have hesitated to do that thing now, but he felt that the imperative necessity for the act excused it.

When he left Simpson's room he descended rapidly to the third floor, and was hastening around and along the balustrade of the main stairway, which would have taken him to the second floor, when directly ahead of him a door down the hall opened partway, permitting a shaft of light to shoot outward across it.

He stopped on the instant, and carried his mind back to the plan that Simpson had drawn, and which he had studied in the room up-stairs.

He knew then, without doubt, that the partly open door was the entrance to the private parlor or sitting-room of Erlina Acosta's suite, and he stood there waiting, expecting momentarily that she would step outside and confront him, for he realized that she must surely discover him if she did so.

But the door remained as it was, partly open; there was, perhaps, a space of ten inches or a foot between it and the casing, and as Patsy bent forward in a listening attitude, he fancied that he could hear the murmur of voices from beyond it. This, however, proved to be only his fancy.

After a moment, now for the present forgetful of his original intention, he crept forward stealthily until he succeeded in securing a position from which, while he was himself in the shadow, he could see into the room beyond the open door.

What he saw startled him, and yet, from his point of vantage he could not determine exactly what it meant unless indeed Isabel Acton had been moved from her own apartments to those occupied by Erlina Acosta; for the latter, when Patsy discovered her, was bending over the wide couch which stood at the opposite extremity of the room, and seemed to be gazing intently down upon and into the sleeping face of some one who was lying there. But whether it was man or woman, Patsy could not determine with his limited advantages.

Determined, however, to know positively, he moved still farther forward, until he was quite close to the door, and he was in the act of pushing it a little bit farther open, so that he could see the better, when Erlina Acosta turned suddenly away from the couch and came rapidly toward him.

Patsy leaped backward and to one side quickly, and then, to make himself as small as possible, he pressed his body closely against the wall, where he stood in silence, holding his breath while Erlina Acosta passed out of the room and to the stairs, and down them out of sight.

And this was Patsy's opportunity, if ever one was to come to him.

Nor did he hesitate to take it.

No sooner had Erlina Acosta disappeared, than he darted forward, passed inside the room, and hurried across it until he stood beside the couch, looking down upon the object that was resting upon it.

And that object was the corpse of a beautiful young woman—she who had once been Isabel Acton.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FIGHT IN THE ROOM UP-STAIRS.

"Isabel Acton," he murmured, startled by what he saw, for, although he had never seen her in his life, he had heard her described a sufficient number of times to feel that there was no doubt concerning his recognition

of her; and, furthermore, he had felt, ever since he heard the story told by Simpson, that something of this nature had happened.

"This," he told himself, "is the explanation of the pistol-shot which Simpson heard in the house soon after midnight last night; this is the explanation of the visits of that strange doctor whom Miss Acton would not have received had she been capable of objection, and this is the explanation of the exclusion from Miss Acton's rooms today of every one, even Simpson, the old, faithful, tried, and trusted servant of the house."

He forgot for the moment that it was quite evident that Erlina Acosta had gone from the room only for a moment for, having left her door ajar when she went out, there was no doubt that she intended to return immediately.

But now he was quickly brought to his senses by hearing a sharp click behind him, instantly accompanied by the sharper and even more ominous sound of a closing door.

He turned quickly.

Erlina Acosta was standing just inside the door through which he had entered, her back was against it, her right arm was extended, and in her hand she held a pistol with the muzzle steadily pointed at Patsy's head; and there was a cold smile of infinite meaning on her darkly beautiful face as she said quietly:

"If you move so much as a finger, I will lay you beside the corpse you have discovered."

Patsy knew that she meant it, too. There was not a doubt in his mind that she would carry out the threat she had uttered if he did not obey her.

Nevertheless, he returned her smile; but not without some trepidation, for in that instant he had not a doubt that he was in the presence of, and confronted by, the one who had murdered Isabel Acton.

How long this tableau might have continued will never be known, for it was interrupted suddenly by a movement of a large black walnut cabinet located at the right-hand side of the room, and almost at right angles from the position from where Patsy was standing.

It swung outward into the room, and from behind it there stepped another figure, this time of an oldish-looking young man, who, strangely enough, had the appearance of one who had been waiting up for a theatrical performance, since the traces of grease-paint were still plainly to be seen upon his features.

And Patsy knew him, also, from descriptions he had heard of him, and almost without volition of his own he exclaimed:

"Henry Hastings!"

A cold grimace, which some would describe as a smile, glittered in the eyes, rather than found expression upon the features, of the man who entered upon this scene.

For a moment he stared fixedly at Patsy, and then rapidly crossing the room to Erlina Acosta, he seized the wrist of her hand which held the weapon, and by a slight pressure of one of his fingers discharged it.

It was already aimed at Patsy, for Erlina did not move the muzzle of it by so much as a hair since she first threatened the young detective.

And the aim was still true enough, for on the instant that the muffled explosion sounded in the room, Patsy pitched forward upon his face still and motionless.

It would not be possible to describe these details so exactly had not Ten-Ichi followed Patsy from that room up-stairs when he left it so suddenly.

But Ten-Ichi, thoroughly aware of Patsy's impulsiveness, and also thoroughly realizing his own cautiousness and dexterity in getting about silently, had glided after him.

There had been no reason why he should keep from Patsy's knowledge the fact that he was following him, save that he believed that he could be of much more effectiveness in the search they were to undertake if he kept entirely upon his own responsibility and permitted Patsy to do the same.

When Patsy descended the stairs, and in following around the balustrade discovered the shaft of light that had confronted him, Ten-Ichi was only a few feet behind him; when Patsy crept forward to peer into the room, Ten-Ichi glided partway down the next flight of stairs toward the second floor—and he was standing there, still watching Patsy, at the instant when Erlina Acosta came out of the room and hastened in the direction of the very spot where he was standing on the stairs.

There was nothing for him to do then but to find some means of escaping her, and so he hastened on down the stairs in front of her, and he concealed himself behind a high door in the hallway on the second floor.

Ten-Ichi, like Patsy, remembered the plan that had been drawn for them by Simpson, and when Erlina, after tapping lightly upon one of the doors on the second floor,

passed beyond it and closed it after her, he knew that she had entered the rooms occupied by General Hastings.

For some moments he was in doubt what it was best for him to do, believing on the whole that it was as well to leave Patsy to his investigation of the rooms above; and while he was still in doubt Erlina came swiftly out again and returned up the stairs as rapidly as she had descended them. And now Ten-Ichi had no doubt whatever that this young woman would discover Patsy, who, if he had found anything to interest him in the rooms on the third floor that he had entered, would without any doubt linger there, entirely forgetful of the importance of making his escape before the woman should return to find him.

And so, when she ascended the stairs, Ten-Ichi followed her; and so it was that when she was about to enter the room and discovering Patsy, stopped, he was only a little way behind her, and was crouched down so that when she turned again and ran across the hall to another door, he used the interval to glide swiftly inside the room, and to conceal himself, entirely without Patsy's knowledge, behind the very black walnut cabinet which has already been mentioned.

Ten-Ichi's idea was that Erlina had gone to warn some other person of the presence of Patsy in that room. When she turned away his first thought was to call to Patsy and for them both to make their escape; but when he glided into the room himself and saw the object that was stretched upon the couch—and recognized it as Patsy had done—the determination came to him on the instant to conceal himself without Patsy's knowledge, and to await results; for he was convinced that he and Patsy together could easily overcome and capture, if necessary, any person or persons whom Erlina Acosta might bring to her assistance.

We must not forget that Ten-Ichi is a Japanese, and is, perhaps, as accomplished as any one who practises the mysterious arts of ju-jutsu.

He was a spectator, of course, of the entire scene that has already been described, and he might have prevented the enactment of the last part of it had he for an instant realized what Henry Hastings—for it really was Henry Hastings—was about to do.

As it was, he had only time to raise a hand from the table near where he was standing, and to hurl it from his hand just at the instant when Henry Hastings compelled the girl, who was holding the pistol, to pull the trigger.

The act saved Patsy's life, although it did not spare him entirely from the effect of the bullet; but instead of penetrating his brain, as it would have done had it not been for the book that Ten-Ichi hurled, it grazed along the top of the young detective's head, stunning him for an instant, and causing him to drop to the floor, as if he had been killed.

But at the same instant Ten-Ichi leaped forward, and, catching Hastings by what is known as the "back-throat" hold, he threw him over his head as if he had been a feather, and so that he crashed against the wall, from which he fell senseless to the floor; and no sooner had he released his terrible throat-hold upon Henry Hastings, than he seized Erlina Acosta, and, forcing her hands behind her, snapped a pair of handcuffs on her wrists, and then, with a second pair, bound her effectually to a chair.

All this required much less time than it takes to tell it.

It is not possible that more than three seconds of actual time elapsed before Ten-Ichi was thoroughly master of the situation; and then it was that he sprang to Patsy's side, who was already manifesting evidence of returning consciousness; for Patsy's head was hard, and his body was young and sturdy.

CHAPTER IX.

NICK CARTER FINDS HIMSELF A PRISONER.

And now it is necessary that we should return to Nick Carter himself.

It will be remembered that we left him just inside the secret passage which was to lead him to the suite of rooms occupied by Isabel Acton, and that before he had time to flash his light around him to discover which way to go, the blow from a hidden enemy fell upon him, and he was stricken senseless.

After that there was a long interval during which he remembered nothing at all; an interval which he afterward knew to have been rather more than twenty-four hours, but which, at the time of his awakening, seemed to him to have consumed only a few moments, for he did not know that he had been kept unconscious, or rather forced to remain in a deep sleep by gentle administrations of chloroform. Just enough was administered to keep him in a dreamy condition from which he did not quite rouse himself.

In the house where he was made a prisoner much had happened since that blow fell upon the head of the detective, and the consequence was that he was subjected, the inhalations of chloroform were not given him, with the resultant consequence that finally the drowsy condition faded from him, and he gradually roused himself.

At first he was mainly conscious of a throbbing pain in his head; but when he sought to raise his hands to investigate, he discovered that he was tightly bound—so tightly and so securely fastened that he was incapable of motion.

And then the entire experience up to the moment he was stricken down, returned to him. He remembered everything.

His first thought, quite naturally, was that Isabel Acton had played treachery upon him; but he dismissed that idea at once, for he reasoned why should she have sought him at all if she were not honest in the motive.

He figured, then, that she had been followed to his house, and that after that he had been closely watched, or that a close watch had been kept upon the house, so that he had been seen when he arrived there at midnight.

But where was he now?

He could not determine that.

All around him the darkness was so intense that he could see nothing, nor could he move his hands or feet in order to investigate by the sense of touch.

He remained in this condition some time, thinking deeply; and then he heard voices beyond the door, and knew that somebody was approaching.

Remembering that he was supposed to be in a stupor, he cautiously closed his eyes and reassumed every outward appearance of the real condition he had been in for so long a time.

Then he knew that a door opened somewhere near him. He felt the rush of air from outside, and he heard the gentle rustle of a woman's garments.

He did not dare to open the lids of his eyes even enough to see dimly between them, for he knew that he was the object of earnest regard on the part of the person who had entered the room where he was a prisoner.

Nick's only object in remaining still and appearing to be unconscious was to learn all he could about the surrounding circumstances that had brought him into the predicament. If the persons who had entered the room with him only believed that he was still in the stupor, and, therefore, incapable of understanding what was said, they would be inclined to talk freely in his presence, or, at least, to make remarks which would afford the detective the clues he sought.

He knew that three persons entered the room, although he did not move his lashes by so much as a flicker, and he breathed regularly and deeply, like one who was under the influence of an anesthetic.

And then, to his amazement he recognized two of the voices he heard. The amazement was, however, caused by the recognition of only one of them for the other one he had somehow expected to hear.

This latter was the voice of Erlina Acosta; but the voice that amazed and astonished him was none other than Henry Hastings—Henry Hastings, whom he had confidently, until that moment, supposed to be safely in Europe.

But the certain knowledge that he was present in the house at that moment was a revelation to Nick Carter; it afforded an explanation much more certain of the whole enigma that had been presented to him by the visit of Isabel Acton.

The third voice—the one he did not recognize—belonged to a man; and there was a distinctly foreign tone and accent to it. Nick could almost imagine that he could see the fellow who possessed those softly musical tones which yet had a suggestion of strength and forcefulness and menace, too, in them.

And now, the reader must bear in mind that although twenty-four hours and a little more had elapsed since Nick Carter was struck down in the secret passage, Nick himself believed that the time had been very short—an hour or two at the most.

"Wait a moment before you bring the others inside," said the soft voice of the stranger. It is necessary that we give this fellow here another dose of the chloroform, in order to be sure that he will sleep."

For an instant Nick wondered how he was to appear to inhale the chloroform without really doing so, for he was determined that he would retain his senses at all hazards; but the question was answered for him, for the next instant he heard the nose of a stopper being withdrawn from a bottle, and a moment later a handkerchief was dropped over his face.

Did you ever try to hold your breath for a considerable

period? If you have, you know how difficult it is to do it. Men who practise it—divers and expert swimmers, become quite proficient, but to those who have not practised it a minute of holding in the breath will induce agony.

But Nick Carter had practised this art, among other things; and when the handkerchief was dropped over his face after having been saturated with the liquid, he resolutely held his breath, for he knew at once by the continued conversation around him that the man who did the act had turned away and was not watching him.

He had to take his chance with the others, for if one of them should discover that he was not breathing and was not, therefore, inhaling the chloroform, they would understand at once that he was playing possum. However, it may as well be admitted at once that they did not discover him; and presently the handkerchief was withdrawn from his face, that same voice remarking:

"It is not well to give him too much just at present. A little later we will administer a dose from which he will never awaken."

"So," thought the detective. "That is the game, is it?"

The conversation around him was not general; neither was it well connected. Most of it referred to things that had passed which the detective did not understand and which he vainly tried to explain.

"It was well," the unknown voice remarked, just as the handkerchief was withdrawn from Nick's face, "that I happened to follow you, mademoiselle. If I had not appeared behind that young Japanese rascal——"

Nick could finish the expressive sleep that went with this unfinished statement. And Henry Hastings replied:

"The scoundrel nearly killed me, for a fact. I thought he had broken my neck, in the first instant, and when he flung me against the walls of the room, I thought I was going right on through them. The first that I knew after that, Doc, was when you were bending over me. But I say—Doc."

"Well?"

"What do you suppose has brought the whole nest of detectives down upon us at this particular time?"

It was Erlina who replied to this question, before the doctor could speak.

"That is all very easily explained," she said. "We know what brought Nick Carter here in the first place. The remainder of what has happened is explained by the fact that he was missed at his home, and that his assistants started out to find him."

"And resulted in our capturing the lot;" the foreign doctor chuckled audibly as he made the remark.

"Resulted, rather," said Henry Hastings gloomily, "in getting us in a devil of a fix. What are we going to do with the outfit now, that's what I want to know? Where we supposed that we only had to rid ourselves of the old man and Isabel, now we've got three more. And I want to tell you right now that the disappearance of Nick Carter and two of his assistants will stir up things."

There was another chuckle from the foreign doctor; but he replied calmly:

"In the first place, *mon ami*, nobody will think of looking for this detective or his two assistants, for a few days. They will have been missing for a week at least, before it will be thought that anything has happened to them—and then there will not be a trace of one of them left to follow."

"But what are we to do with them?" insisted Hastings.

"My dear friend, there is only one thing to do with them—*kill them*," was the calm reply. "We cannot let them go away; we cannot let them live, for if we do they will go away in spite of us. We can do nothing but kill them; and, after all, if they are well out of the way, all the rest of our plans will be just that much the easier."

Nick fancied that Hastings shuddered. There was a moment before he replied; then he said:

"When we started out on this scheme, proposed by you, Doc, and afterward agreed to by Erlina, it was understood that there was to be no bloodshed; but already there has been one deliberate murder, and now there are three more staring us in the face."

"All were, or will be, necessary, *mon ami*," said the [illegible] and if Nick had dared to look he would have seen a complacent smile cross the handsome but sinister face.

"If I had guessed——" began Hastings; but the doctor interrupted him sternly.

"You did not guess," he said. "Now we are face to face with a condition which we must meet unflinchingly, if you get control of your father's millions—and that is the reason why we are here. I killed Miss Annie; you did not; therefore, you are in no way to blame for that—and there is one person at least among us who is not sorry that the deed is done."

Nick started, so that he almost betrayed himself. He knew now that Isabel had been coldly murdered, and that this soft-voiced stranger had done the deed.

He knew, also, that it was only a question of time and expediency when he would be as coolly and thoroughly put out of the way.

And his assistants? He knew that neither of them who had been captured could be Chick, for Chick had departed for Boston before he himself left the house. Therefore, it must be Ten-Ichi and Patsy who had fallen into the hands of these cold-blooded murderers.

"But how in the world did they get here so soon?" the detective asked himself; "and what sent them here at all? It is certain that I must have been a prisoner in this room much longer than I suppose."

He heard the door open again; he could hear after that the movements of the strange doctor and Hastings while the two brought into the room, one after another, the two assistants, and dropped them down near the detective.

A moment later, without resuming the conversation that had already become so interesting to the detective and had told him so much, the three went outside, and Nick heard the door close after them with a sharp click.

And still he waited a moment before he uttered a word; but at last he spoke.

"Patsy! Ten-Ichi!" he said, in a sharp whisper.

There was no reply, and he repeated the calls. It was evident that neither of his assistants was conscious, and lest for the conversation that the detective had overheard, he would have feared that they had already been killed.

The intense blackness of the room permitted Nick to see nothing, nor could he get response of any kind from his companions, and so he set about the task of freeing himself from the bonds that held him so securely.

CHAPTER X.

A PROFESSIONAL MURDERER.

It was soon evident that Nick Carter's captors placed more reliance upon the drug they had given him—or, perhaps, in the room in which he was imprisoned—than upon the bonds with which he was fastened, for he had very little difficulty in freeing himself from them.

It is possible that they did not take into consideration his wonderful strength; but be that as it may, it was not ten minutes after his callers had gone out, when he raised himself upon his feet, entirely free from the cords that had bound him.

To his surprise, he discovered that his pockets had not been rifled, save to deprive him of his weapons. Those had been taken away, but his flash-light remained securely in one of his pockets, and he fastened the button of it down to make the light continuous.

His first glance, then, was around the room, to discover in what sort of place he had been imprisoned; he did not care to have the fact that he was using a light escape through one of the windows of the room to inform others.

But a single glance told him that there were no windows in the room.

Neither was there a door.

On every side, and above and below, he was stared in the face by smooth, barren walls of heavy, paneled oak. It was as if he were inside a huge box that had been nailed against him. There was no visible outlet.

And yet he was positive that he had heard a door open and close. Then he laughed softly to himself.

"I have forgotten," he murmured, "that this whole house is a network of passages and secret doors. I have been told of it often enough to have recalled the fact before this. I was even struck down in one of these passageways before I was brought here, else I would not be here now."

"And so, it would seem that I am a prisoner in one of those secret rooms of the house. The place has not a sign of a door or a window. It is like a box—and yet, the ventilation appears to be all right, at that."

And here he made another discovery.

Directly over his head, imbedded in the ceiling, was a ground-glass globe, and hanging down from it, within reach of his hands, were two cords. He pulled one of them, and instantly the boxlike room was flooded with light which seemed all the more brilliant by contrast with the utter darkness that had preceded it.

He knew that none of the light could escape from the room, since there was not a crack nor a crevice in it anywhere; and so at once he gave his attention to his two companions.

Ten-Ichi and Patsy were both unconscious. The former had an ugly wound upon his head, as if he had been struck from behind with a heavy instrument. The wound had been roughly bandaged, and the bandage was soaked with blood. Patsy also had a wound at the

top of his head where the bullet that we already know about had grazed his skull, stunning him for a moment. Both were lying as if they were dead, and by their heavy breathing Nick had no doubt that the soft-voiced doctor had administered a hypodermic dose of morphine to them, to keep them unconscious for a considerable length of time.

But Nick examined the wounds on their heads thoroughly. Patsy's he saw was not serious at all; but he was not so sure about Ten-Ichi's. The latter had received a blow that might have felled an ox, and Nick was not at all sure that the skull had not been fractured.

But there was absolutely nothing he could do then. There was not a remedy of any kind at hand in that boxlike room. He could only make both of them as comfortable as possible and remove the bands that held them. For the rest, he must wait until the effects of the morphine should wear off.

But Nick was determined now to escape from that room.

Many a time before now had he searched for the mechanisms of secret passages in different phases of his experiences—and found them. He did not for a moment doubt that he could do it now.

He remembered that while he was lying there when he first awakened he had heard the sound of voices from beyond the partition, and that afterward he had heard a door open and later close again; and now, although there was no sign of a door anywhere, he remembered very well about where the sound had sprung from.

He confined himself, therefore, to that portion of the paneled wall.

There is one thing about secret passages in a building which one who searches for such things should never forget, and that is that in one house all are likely to be created about on the same plan.

Some one mechanic is intrusted with their creation, and, like counterfeiters, they all have an individualized style and character of work which each one follows for his own.

We need not go into detail about that search. It is sufficient to state that Nick was employed upon it for a long time before he discovered the way out of that room; but he finally did discover it; a portion of the paneling alongside one of the panels came loose in his hand when he touched it, and behind it was located the spring he sought.

After that the rest was comparatively easy.

When he stepped outside, he found himself in the main hall of the main floor of the mansion, with which, it will be remembered, he was quite familiar.

At the far extremity of the hall burned a dim light shaded by a red globe—it was the regular hall light which was left burning in the house at night. Beside him, near at hand, was the butler's and footman's retiring room, where they waited during the day and evenings to answer bells. Near at hand, in another direction, was the closed door which led into General Hastings' study.

Nick decided to enter the study. He knew about the secret entrance to that room, which he had advised the general to close and seal. He recalled that Isabel had told him that it had been done—so he passed silently through and examined it.

A moment later, satisfied that there was now only one means of entering that room, and that by the door through which he had just passed, he returned to the boxlike prison and carried his two unconscious assistants, one by one, into the study; and there he arranged them again as carefully as he could on the two couches which the room contained; and then he softly withdrew, closing and locking the door behind him and dropping the key into his pocket.

Now he felt that he was free to investigate the interior of that house as he pleased, and a glance at the time convinced him that there was sufficient left to accomplice all he wished to do before the inmates of the house should be astir in the morning.

The servants' quarters he knew were in a detached wing, connected with the main house by a covered gallery; only Simpson and one of the footmen slept in the house proper.

Nick stood silently outside the study-door for a moment, considering what he should do first, for already he had guessed considerable of the chicanery that was going on within the walls of the mansion.

He saw in the return of Henry Hastings—who had managed to make it appear that he was still in Europe—the deliberate fulfillment of a plot against the general, in which that foreign doctor had been instrumental to aid him, and in which, being the greater villain of the two, he had now taken the lead.

Nick had already heard from the doctor's own lips that Isabel Acton had been killed. If that were true—and the detective could not doubt it—there was nothing that he could do save to avenge her.

He already knew that Erlina Acosta was concerned in the plot of murder and robbery, and consequently she was one of the enemies whom he had to overcome. He did not know anything about Mrs. Hastings—the comparatively young wife of the old general—but he had his doubts of her, and always had had them.

Plainly, then, there seemed but one thing for him to do, and that was at once to search for and find General Hastings himself, to rescue him from whatever peril he might be in, and after that to devote his energies to overcoming the enemy.

While standing there, he listened intently; but he heard no sound of any kind, and he decided that inasmuch as morning was only a couple of hours away, they had decided to get some needed rest. He hoped and believed that they had at last retired.

The rooms of the old general were on the second floor. The stairway began at the front of the house, and he went softly toward it, ascended, and presently stood before the door of General Hastings' apartments—and as he took his position there, he plainly saw a shadow advancing slowly toward him from toward the rear of the hall.

He believed that he had not been seen, and a moment of observation convinced him of that—and the next instant revealed to him the figure of Simpson, advancing slowly along the hall toward the stairway.

Poor Simpson! He had waited in his own room at the top of the house for the return of the two men he had admitted to it, in vain. They had not come back, and now he had braced himself to the point of going in search of them. But Simpson was so greatly frightened that he was ready to shriek out with fright at any instant. It is not surprising, therefore, that he did faint dead away the moment the detective sprang upon him from behind and bore him to the floor—for Nick Carter had no idea of how Simpson might stand in the plots that were going on in that house.

Nick took the time to carry Simpson, also, to the room where he had left Ten-Ichi and Tony, and to bind him securely before he left him; and then he returned again to the door of the general's apartments.

He had never been inside these rooms, but he knew about how they were situated. He knew that when he should pass through the door that was directly in front of him he would be inside a small entry from which the other rooms of the suite were entered; and so he did not hesitate to open the door softly and pass through.

Instantly he heard voices beyond him, proceeding from another room, which he believed to be the sitting-room of the suite.

The door was slightly ajar, and as he tiptoed forward, having softly closed the door into the hall, he found that he could peer through the opening upon the scene that was being enacted.

And a strange scene it was.

The soft-voiced doctor was speaking—in French—and it was the last half of a sentence he was uttering to his companion that Nick caught, and understood. Translated, it was:

"——why you should ever remove it until you have no further use for it. You know as well as I do that if you had not dashed aside your wig and rubbed off your paint before you went to the rescue of Erlina when those two cubs attacked her, they would not now have any idea that Henry Hastings is in this country. As it is, they know you are here—and that is the reason why they must be killed."

Hastings grunted out something that was unintelligible, for the doctor was working rapidly over his face with paint and brushes; and the foreigner continued:

"Your resemblance to the old man is perfect, when I have finished with the make-up. The only weak part in the masquerade is your voice, and you are getting that down very well indeed. Believe me, you have only to play up sick, and to carry out the program as I have outlined it, and nothing can stand in the way of our success. Keep out of sight, and only be half-seen by those who will be convinced that you are really your father, and the rest is easy; and then, within two weeks we will all take our departure for the other side, and the rest of the business can be done from there. It is all very simple."

"But the bodies!"

The foreign doctor laughed aloud, easily.

"I will take care of all that," he said. "You have only to play your part, and play it well, as General Hastings. I will do the rest."

"But the old man himself! What of him?"

"My dear fellow, I am going over now, that I have done with you for the present, to embalm his body——"

"What! Have you murdered him, Gustave?"

"Yes"—calmly—"I am going now to embalm his body and to put it in that box-room with the others, whom I shall now put out of the way. By the time they are found—if they ever are—we will be beyond the danger of suspicion."

CHAPTER XI.

THE MURDERER AT WORK.

The monumental effrontery of this professional murderer was about the most revolting thing the detective could recall in his experience. He coolly told Henry Hastings that he had murdered his father; he as coolly announced that he was now going to put three more human beings to death. He announced, without emotion, that it was his intention to embalm the bodies of his victims, and then to hide them in one of the secret rooms of the old house—the same one, doubtless, where Nick had awakened to find himself a prisoner—where they would likely enough remain for many months, or years, undiscovered. Already the man had committed two murders, by his own confession: He had killed Isabel Acton and General Hastings—and now it was his intention to put Nick Carter and his two assistants to death.

But, fortunately, Nick Carter and his two assistants were not sending him to that secret room on the ninth floor, where he had left them unconscious, and entirely at his mercy when he should choose to return.

Rather Gustave laid aside his paint and brushes, and, having adjusted the wig and the fierce-looking mustache which was always characteristic of the old general, he stepped back to a little distance to review his work.

"You will do nicely, now, mon," he said, laughing lightly. "Truly remember that you cannot manufacture that disguise yourself. You require me to do it for you—and there is no always time. So I admonish you to let it remain now as I have fixed it, and not to disarrange it in any way—unless you wish to keep your father and the others company."

Henry Hastings shuddered.

"I believe you would murder me, also, if I were not necessary to your plans."

"But certainly; why not; only say, rather, if you should interfere with them. And it will be an interference if you should disarrange that disguise I have fixed so superbly. On my word, Henri, if your father were alive, and could see you at this moment, he would suspect that he was gazing into a mirror at his own reflection."

"But I cannot sleep with all this devilish stuff on me, Gustave!"

"Oh, yes, you can. At least, you will have to do so—or go without sleep—or perhaps sleep eternally. Take your choice."

He laughed lightly, and then with a shrug of his shoulders, he turned away and stepped rapidly toward the door behind which Nick Carter was hiding.

And Nick had barely time to step aside and pass into an adjoining room that opened off the entry, when Gustave passed out and closed the door behind him.

Nick knew that if Gustav went directly to the secret-room where the prisoners were supposed to be, he would discover that they had escaped, and was likely to return immediately to inform Henry Hastings of the fact; but if, on the other hand, he did not go there at once, there would be time for the detective to accomplish what in that moment he had determined to do.

For an instant he hesitated whether to follow the Frenchman, or to carry out the purpose he had formed, and take the chances of discovery—and he decided on the latter course, believing that he could acomplish what he wished to do very quickly, since everything necessary was ready at hand.

And so it was that Gustave had barely closed the door behind him, when Nick Carter stepped boldly into the room where Henry Hastings was still seated in the chair where the Frenchman had been working upon him.

Hastings had lighted a cigar, and was now puffing contentedly upon it; but when that apparition appeared in the doorway in front of him, the cigar dropped from his teeth, and rolled to the floor, his jaw fell, his eyes stared, and his whole body began to tremble violently.

And Nick did not give him time or opportunity to utter a cry. He leaped forward quickly, and, seizing Hastings by the throat, strangled a cry that otherwise would have escaped him, and he retained the hold until he had choked him into insensibility.

And that did not take long.

What the fierce grip upon the man's throat did not accomplish, fright did. Hastings became limp almost at once, and settled back in the chair from which he had partly raised himself, senseless and inanimate.

And now Nick Carter worked with great rapidity, for he realized that at any moment Gustave might return, having discovered that his prisoners had escaped. It never occurred to Nick that he might search for, and find them where he had placed them, in the general's study.

With rapid motions the detective pulled the wig and mustache from the head and face of the unconscious man in the chair; and with equal rapidity he adjusted them upon himself.

And then he seized paints and brushes, and the other necessary articles to make up the disguises, from the small table at his elbow, where they were ready at hand, and began with the dexterity of which only Nick Carter was capable, to make himself up as Henry Hastings was made up—in counterpart of General Hastings.

We need not discuss the details of this.

Those who are familiar with the activities of Nick Carter, know how frequently he has had to do this sort of thing, and are aware of the talent he possesses for it. In stature, he recalled the fact that he and the general had been about the same, save that the latter was rather the slighter of the two; but that difference could easily be overcome by the arrangement of clothing.

In a surprisingly short time the detective completed the make-up of his features, had adjusted the wig and mustache, had drawn the necessary lines upon his face, and had otherwise rendered his appearance an exact copy of the unconscious man before him, and, therefore, of the old general himself.

His next move after that was to carry the body of the still unconscious man into another room of the suite, where he quickly stripped Hastings of his outer clothing, and donned it himself; and that done, he bound and gagged his victim, who was now returning to consciousness, and locked him inside the bathroom.

And then he returned to the room, where he had made the change, arranged everything as exactly as possible as he had found it upon entering, searched about until he found a revolver, which he dropped into one of the pockets of the coat he wore, and then, with a sigh of relief, he removed a cigar from the box on the table, and lighted it.

He glanced at the time then, and found that exactly [illegible] minutes had passed since he began to make the alterations in his appearance—ample time, he thought, for [illegible] to have returned had he gone directly to the [illegible], and discovered that his prisoners were missing.

Nick crossed to one of the windows, and saw that daylight was at hand; that in a few minutes more a new day would be born—and then, with sudden resolution, he determined to follow the doctor.

It grew light very rapidly.

When he stepped out upon the hall, he could see the entire length of it.

Straight ahead of him, but across it, on the other side, were the doors which led to the apartment formerly occupied by Isabel Acton, and one of them was half-open.

Stepping forward quickly, Nick crossed the hall, and stood in the open door, and as he did so, he discovered the doctor in the act of eagerly searching the dead woman's effects; that is, he had tossed many of her possessions into the middle of the floor, and was going through them rapidly, as if he were in search of something.

But he raised his eyes when Nick approached, for the detective took no pains to conceal his presence from him; and a dark scowl settled upon the Frenchman's brow, so that in that instant Nick knew that here was the master-spirit of the plotting, after all.

"What did you follow me for?" he demanded, in French, and Nick, imitating to perfection the voice of the general, for that was easier than the voice of Henry, replied:

"I wanted to see what you were doing."

"Well, now that you have seen, go back where you belong."

"What *are* you doing?" asked Nick.

"That is none of your infernal business."

"You are searching for something, aren't you?"

"I am searching for the will, you fool! You know that it was given to the Acton girl to keep, by your father."

"But what do you want with the will, now that I have taken the place of my father?"

"You might die—suddenly," was the significant response; "and, by heaven, you will, too, if you don't obey orders better."

"I will go back," said Nick, pretending to be frightened. "But, first, tell me what you have done with the others? Have you killed them yet?"

Gustave shrugged his shoulders.

"What an ugly word," he said. "No; I have not been near them. I came here when I left you. They can wait. They will out escape."

"I am not so sure of that," said Nick softly.

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Gustave hotly.

"I mean that you do not know Nick Carter."

"Bah! I know him well enough. That is, I know of him. I have seen him in Paris. I have heard of him often enough, too. I have often wished to be pitted against him; and now that I have got the best of him, it will be pleasant information to some of my compatriots when I carry the news back to Paris."

"But suppose that he should recover—there in that room where we left him?"

"Bah! I chloroformed him."

"Suppose that he fooled you. Suppose he was conscious all the time and that he did not inhale a breath of the chloroform? What then?"

"What the devil do you mean, anyhow? What has startled you, Henri?"

"A realization of the danger we are in has startled me. Nick Carter, with two of his assistants, are prisoners in that room downstairs. Or Henry Jones won't hold that man. You do not know him. If he should recover consciousness, it would not take him long to break loose from his bonds and to make his escape."

"You told me yourself that he could not escape from the room."

"But since then I have remembered that my father told me a great deal about the secret passages of this house, and it is not unlikely that he knows as much about that one as we do. If that should be true, he would have no difficulty in making his escape from it. And then—pouf!"

"Come, then! We will go and see, at once."

"Wait. The general is dead somewhere in this house—I don't know where, but you said you had murdered him, and, of course, he has to somewhere about. Then, Lobel Acton is dead—murdered also by you. Her body is in Erlina's room, waiting to be taken care of. I suppose you intend to embalm that, and hide it with the others. But the fact remains that there are already two of your victims ready to be found inside this house, and that at any moment the detective may regain his liberty and find them. What then?"

"Curse you for a croaker! What has got into you? What has happened to you in the few minutes that you have been alone? You are not the same at all, somehow."

"I am frightened."

"You don't act frightened. You act as if—never mind. It will be the worse for you if you get troublesome."

"But I wish to be sure that Nick Carter is safely disposed of. I wish to be sure that he is out of the way for good and all. Come. Let us go to him. I will stand by while you put on the finishing touches that you told about. Until I know that he is disposed of I shall not have a peaceful moment."

"Your courage seems suddenly to have revived," said Gustave suspiciously, and staring at the man he supposed was Henry Hastings.

"It has," admitted Nick. "Will you come?"

"Yes. Come on. You shall kill Nick Carter yourself, in order that you may be sure that he is dead; and, by heaven, if you refuse, I will kill you!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE TABLEAU IN THE GENERAL'S STUDY.

As they passed through the doorway into the hall, Nick halted suddenly; and he said:

"Ought we not to have Erlina with us? She is as much in this as we are, and if one is to be guilty, all had best be in it. Where is she? I will call her."

He did not wait for a reply, but ran to the stairs and up them quickly, and a moment later tapped upon Erlina's door.

She responded at once, rather to Nick's surprise, for he had supposed that she would be resting after the night of vigil and excitement. But she was fully dressed, even to wearing her hat, and Nick believed that she had been on the point of going outside the house for a walk, and some air, after the rather exciting episodes of the night.

She stared him in the face, coldly, for a moment, for it was evident that she did not doubt that it was Henry Hastings who was standing before her. Then she said:

"What do you want?"

Again the detective imitated the voice of the general instead of assuming that of Henry Hastings, the time; and again, as before, he found that it filled the requirements nicely. Erlina had no suspicion whatever of him.

"There is another job on hand," he answered her roughly. "Come. We want you."

"Who wants me?" she demanded.

"Gustave and I want you. Come"

It seemed to be with difficulty that she repressed a shudder; and then, almost without expression, she murmured:

"I hate him! I hate him!"

"Hate who?" asked Nick, although he perfectly well knew to whom she referred.

"Gustave. Your friend from Paris. He is a natural murderer. It is his profession. And, Henry, he means to kill you, too, as soon as you have possessed yourself of the fortune of your father, and converted as much of it into cash as you can. He does not mean that you shall live after that."

"Possibly two of us can play at that little game," said the detective, in the voice of the general. "I have no fear of him. I shall not give him a chance to kill me. Never fear—or to kill you, either."

"Oh, he does not intend to kill me—now," she replied, following him slowly; and so they passed through the hall and down the stairs to where the Frenchman was awaiting them.

Gustave's self-assurance had returned to him, and without a word he turned and led the way to the main floor of the building, and thence toward the door—or rather the place of the concealed door to the secret room.

Nick purposely hung back as they approached it. He wished to see the effect upon the French doctor when he should enter that room, and find that his well-laid plans had been interfered with.

As soon as the secret panel was thrown open the doctor switched on the light into the boxlike room—and upon the floor where the three men had been lying when Gustave there last.

For an instant, when he discovered that the room was empty, he did nothing but stare; and then like a flash he turned about and with a spring like a cat, he leaped upon Nick with the ferocity of a tiger.

"You knew this! You knew this!" he cried out, trying to force the detective in his grasp, but too greatly excited to notice whether he succeeded or not. "You have visited this room yourself. You have liberated them—*or have you only hidden them somewhere else?*"

He forgot in his excitement that he had not been parted from Henry Hastings long enough for him to have accomplished such a thing; but when Nick slowly freed himself from the grasp that was upon him, and nodded in the affirmative, he seemed no surprised.

"I put them in what I supposed was a safer place—and another one with them," said the detective. "They are in the study. Here is the key. Come. Nick Carter knows enough about this house to have escaped from this room. I did not think that any one could get out of the study, once the door was locked. Come."

He gave the key into Gustave's hand, and the Frenchman received it. He was too greatly surprised to say much; but there was a glitter in his eyes and a showing of the teeth over the corners of his mouth, which would have boded ill for Henry Hastings had the detective indeed have been he.

But he was now also thoroughly roused. He did not intend to fool any more with the circumstances that surrounded him; and as he took the key in his hand he also drew a slender but glittering blade from his pocket, and held it in the other hand.

"The work shall be done now—*at once,*" he said meaningly.

There was a switch outside the door by which the electric lights could be turned on inside, and, fearing that the blinds might be closed, and, therefore, that there would not be sufficient light for his purpose, Nick reached up and turned this switch as they reached the door.

Gustave, in the meantime, had applied the key and turned it; and now he pushed the door open in front of him quickly.

And as he did that, Nick seized his two hands; drew them quickly behind him; tore the dagger from his grasp, and dropped it to the floor; and snapped a pair of handcuffs upon his wrists; and then he sent him reeling forward into the room with a sharp push.

It was all done as if with one gesture; it was all accomplished so quickly that even Erlina, who stood beside the detective, did not realize that anything had happened until it was accomplished, and she had herself been seized in turn and pushed through the doorway into the study after the Frenchman.

And then, when they both turned, Gustave, with curses on his lips, and Erlina with surprised consternation and affright in her eyes, Nick quickly closed the door, locked it, and dropped the key into his pocket—*and then he tore the wig and mustache from his face and threw them to the floor, at once revealing the fraud and the trick he had played upon them.*

Manacled as he was, with his hands behind him and therefore helpless, the Frenchman nevertheless uttered a howl of rage and threw himself lustily forward at the

detective; and Erlina at the same instant also hurled herself forward. She was without a weapon, but nevertheless she seemed suddenly to have been transformed into a fury, who would tear out the detective's eyes if once she came within reach of him.

But Nick easily avoided them both.

He caught one of Erlina's hands with one of his own, and bent her arm the wrong way, so that he easily forced her down to the floor beside him, on her knees; and with the other hand he seized Gustave by the throat and held him so.

Beyond them, across the room, Patsy was slowly rising to his feet, still dazed somewhat by the morphine that had been administered to him, but still alive to the fact that his services were needed. Ten-Ichi, who was severely wounded, as well as drugged, remained motionless, and old Simpson, who was entirely conscious, and therefore aware of all that was happening, was still securely bound and gagged as the detective had left him.

"If you think you are strong enough to hold her, Patsy, you may take the woman," said Nick, seeing him approach. "Do you?"

"You bet!" was the confident response. "She has managed to get the best of me twice to-night, but I'll hold her now, if she is a thousand times as strong as she was then."

But Erlina struggled fiercely when Patsy seized her, and for a moment it seemed as if she would overcome him; but presently he succeeded in forcing her backward against the wall, and he held her there with one hand while with the other he slowly but thoroughly handcuffed her, so that she could not escape.

In the meantime Nick had cared for the Frenchman.

And Gustave had fought fiercely, too.

He, like all criminals when they are at last cornered, realized that the game was up, and that now he would surely have to pay the utmost penalty for his crimes; and he fought, not with any hope of making his escape, but with the determination to hurt somebody if he could do so.

He could not, however; and after a little he was rendered helpless and powerless to make his escape—and then Simpson was released from his bonds.

"I'm sorry, Simpson," said Nick, "that I was forced to treat you as, for I know that you do not deserve it; but I did not want you to make a sound, and I did not want you moving about either, for a time."

He turned then to the Frenchman, and added:

"And now, Doctor Gustave Curie—for I happen to know that to be your right name—how do you feel?"

Gustave had recovered his suavity.

"I feel," he replied slowly, and with an enigmatical smile on his handsome but sinister face, "that I am not dead yet—and am not likely to be for some time to come. Your methods of justice in this country are slow—very slow, Mr. Carter. There may yet be an opportunity for me to escape; and if I should—*look out for yourself*, that's all.

In the sleeping-room of the suite formerly occupied by Isabel Acton, the body of General Hastings was discovered. Gustave had arranged it there, ready for the operation of embalming. The body of Isabel was where Patsy and Ten-Ichi first saw it. It had not been disturbed in the meanwhile. It turned out that during the scene in that room, just at the instant when Ten-Ichi hurled Henry Hastings over his head against the wall, Gustav had entered the room from the secret passage, and had struck Ten-Ichi with a loaded cane he had in his hand.

And it might as well be stated here that there were many days before Ten-Ichi fully recovered from the effects of that treacherous blow.

* * * * * * * * *

That completes our story.

Erlina Acosta, who, after all, was guilty chiefly because of her love for a bad man, and because of an easy conscience, managed somehow to kill herself before she was brought up for trial; it was supposed that she had poison concealed about her which the authorities had not discovered; but Gustave Curie, the Frenchman, lived to be tried, convicted, and executed for his crimes.

And so it was with Henry Hastings, with the saving clause that he was sent to prison for life, instead of to the death-chair.

And so with him ended the career of the Woman of the Mask, and of the Masked Woman—for the latter had been Erlina, of course. Their entire scheme originally was to frighten the general into the making of a new will; and when they found they could not acomplish that, the tactics already described, were resorted to.

THE END.

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